

Women on the Waterfront Oral History Project
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KEVIN CASTLE
INTERNATIONAL LONGSHORE AND WAREHOUSE UNION, LOCAL 19
PACIFIC COAST PENSIONERS ASSOCIATION
MEMBER

NARRATOR: KEVIN CASTLE

INTERVIEWER: ALISON STEICHEN

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[00:00:00] **ALISON STEICHEN:** This is Alison Steichen with a Women of the Waterfront oral history interview at the Harry Bridges Center at the University of Washington. Today is May 8, 2024, and we are here with Kevin Castle at her home in Seattle, Washington. Hello, Kevin.

[00:00:35] **KEVIN CASTLE:** Hi.

[00:00:37] **ALISON:** Would you please state your name, registration number and your local?

[00:00:41] **KEVIN:** Kevin Castle, 56876, Local 19 ILWU.

[00:00:51] **ALISON:** Where and when were you born?

[00:00:54] **KEVIN:** I was born in 1952 in Coos Bay, Oregon, which is where my family was hiding out during the McCarthy era. My father was a labor organizer and suspected Red, hounded by the FBI, so we fled Seattle and hid out in Coos Bay, Oregon and adopted fake names. I was actually born under a different name. I spent the first year of my life underground.

[00:01:48] **ALISON:** Wow. When did you move to Seattle then?

[00:01:51] **KEVIN:** After that first year.

[00:01:54] **ALISON:** So, you were very young when your family moved to Seattle. Where were your parents originally from?

[00:02:07] **KEVIN:** My mother grew up in Aberdeen. Her father was a bootlegger and immigrant from Italy from a family of nine kids. My father was born in Opportunity, Washington, which is near Spokane.

[00:02:34] **ALISON:** Did your parents have any union affiliations or activities then?

[00:02:40] **KEVIN:** My dad was secretary of the Ship Scalpers Union. My mother was an actress, working at the old Seattle Playhouse.

[00:02:58] **ALISON:** You mentioned their politics. They were labeled as Reds.

[00:03:01] **KEVIN:** They were left-wing.

[00:03:09] **ALISON:** Your father got his start with the ILWU [International Longshoremen and Warehouse Union] ?

[00:03:13] **KEVIN:** Yeah, my father was blacklisted, so when I was quite young, he was supporting our family by cutting lawns. The ILWU was the only union that was accepting suspected Reds, so a very progressive union. My father started there when I was five, in 1957, as a B-person, working largely on banana boats.

[00:04:00] **ALISON:** He made a career and retired from Local 19?

[00:04:09] **KEVIN:** He did.

[00:04:10] **ALISON:** What was your early life in Seattle like, the schools you went to?

[00:04:16] **KEVIN:** I grew up in this house in the Central Area of Seattle. Went to schools that were majority Black. They were Harrison Elementary, Meany Junior High and Garfield High School.

[00:04:37] **ALISON:** What were your hobbies back then? What did you enjoy doing?

[00:04:44] **KEVIN:** I loved playing in the woods when I was a kid because we're surrounded by woods here in this house. When I was a teenager, I embraced the counterculture movement. Experimented with a lot of drugs.

[laughing] Listened to a lot of rock ‘n’ roll. Went to a lot of rock festivals. I then graduated and started a career as an antiwar movement activist.

[00:05:36] **ALISON:** You made a job out of that?

[00:05:40] **KEVIN:** No, not a job. That was just a vocation, I guess you would call it, but that was the focus of my life between high school and college.

[00:05:55] **ALISON:** What was the time period between high school and college for you?

[00:06:02] **KEVIN:** 1970 to 1974.

[00:06:07] **ALISON:** You mentioned college. Where did you go?

[00:06:11] **KEVIN:** UW.

[00:06:12] **ALISON:** Did you end up graduating?

[00:06:14] **KEVIN:** Yes.

[00:06:16] **ALISON:** What was your degree in?

[00:06:17] **KEVIN:** History.

[00:06:18] **ALISON:** How do you go from that to a career on the waterfront?

[00:06:25] **KEVIN:** I graduated in 1979 with one of the least marketable degrees—a degree in history—with few prospects. I had spent the summers working as a ship’s clerk. My father had introduced me to work on the waterfront, so I was in a good position to be hired when they finally opened up to hiring women in 1980.

I entered the workforce with 11 other women.

[00:07:22] **ALISON:** Do you remember the date?

[00:07:25] **KEVIN:** Not the date. It was May 1980.

[00:07:29] **ALISON:** Do you remember your first time having to go to the hiring hall, the dispatch hall, and peg in?

[00:07:37] **KEVIN:** I do. There were 150 of us in that B pool. We were in a very ramshackle building of the old hiring hall, which was right below the Pike Place Market. We got to pick our places on the pegboard. I ended up with a contingent of all Irish guys, who I ended up working around mostly.

[00:08:14] **ALISON:** What was it like to get in with the women? Was it an interview process, or did you just sign up and then they took you?

[00:08:23] **KEVIN:** There was an interview process, as I recall.

[00:08:29] **ALISON:** And they decided on the number 12?

[00:08:33] **KEVIN:** Yeah.

[00:08:36] **ALISON:** What was your first job after all that?

[00:08:39] **KEVIN:** My first job was at Pier 15, which is on the Duwamish. The Duwamish is kind of a wind tunnel. I remember it was very cold. I didn't yet have proper gear, so I was freezing. We were lashing containers to a barge with chains that were bigger than my arm that had hooks on them that could sever a finger. [laughing] And I just remember thinking, what did I get myself into? But I survived the first day.

[00:09:32] **ALISON:** And came back for more the next day?

[00:09:34] **KEVIN:** Yeah. [laughing]

[00:09:42] **ALISON:** What was your favorite operation to work, the best cargo? Was it lashing the barges, or was there something else?

[00:09:48] **KEVIN:** It was not lashing. Definitely not lashing. [laughing] Lashing is brutal. One of my favorites was working on the car ships because they were always early days. They would usually hire about 50 longshore workers in ships that were about the size of cruise ships.

It was like one, big merry-go-round. You'd go up to the top deck and there would be rows and rows and rows of shiny, new cars, all tightly parked. You would climb into a car in the dark and then speed down the ramps, which were a spiral, and then head out through a football field of asphalt pier to park in a row. Then you'd get ferried back in a van, where there would be lively discussions. Then, get back to the ship. That would all be about a five-minute circuit, doing each car.

We would get the cars usually done by noon and go home.

[00:11:34] **ALISON:** That's still quite a few trips with a five-minute turnaround time.

[00:11:37] **KEVIN:** Yeah, it was, but it was nice to have the afternoon off and know that you were getting paid for the whole day.

[00:11:47] **ALISON:** Did you have people, or a gang, or certain individuals that you worked with more than others?

[00:11:56] **KEVIN:** I worked mostly around the Irish guys. Bob Flannery, who was probably the oldest poolie, a very slight guy who the rest of us kind of carried because he was pretty slow, and he had the nickname "Flannery Will Get You Nowhere." [laughing]

Danny Neville was probably the guy I partnered up with most. He was a Vietnam vet—really kind of a damaged soul, who drank a lot and took a lot of drugs, but had a brilliant sense of humor, so working with him was always a treat because he would just keep me laughing all day.

[00:13:02] **ALISON:** Was it happenstance that you worked with the, as you call, the Irish, or was that by design?

[00:13:08] **KEVIN:** We were just next to each other on the pegboard, so in the B pool, and we'd get assigned jobs next to each other a lot of the time.

[00:13:20] **ALISON:** Did you enjoy working with that group?

[00:13:23] **KEVIN:** Mostly, until things started to harden against the women, and then things cooled off. But mostly, it was okay working around them.

[00:13:45] **ALISON:** What was the time period that things started to harden? How long were you there before you felt that?

[00:13:51] **KEVIN:** It was about six months.

[00:13:55] **ALISON:** Can you recall a specific reason for the shift?

[00:13:59] **KEVIN:** The A-men made it clear to the B-men that they should get rid of the women, and that they would not advance them to A status unless they got rid of the women. That was no idle threat because getting advanced had to go through union approval, so the majority of union members had to vote for the B pool to advance. Apart from just the natural misogyny that you find in men, there was this threat that the A-men imposed on us.

[00:14:57] **ALISON:** So, the A-men threatened your fellow brothers in the B pool to take on the task of getting rid of the women. Were they specific in how they were to get rid of you, or was it just generic?

[00:15:15] **KEVIN:** Just through harassment.

[00:15:18] **ALISON:** They wanted to do that to force quit?

[00:15:21] **KEVIN:** Yeah.

[00:15:23] **ALISON:** Were they successful of the 12?

[00:15:25] **KEVIN:** They were not successful. This job paid five times what my former jobs paid. The health benefits were lavish. There was no way they were going to get rid of me.

[00:15:54] **ALISON:** Did you ever have to walk a strike or picket line or anything like that with any of your brothers?

[00:16:03] **KEVIN:** Yes. We did have a strike. I can't remember what year it was, but we walked the picket line, and there was a lot of solidarity. It really united people.

[00:16:14] **ALISON:** Were you treated differently on the picket line than you were, say, in the terminal?

[00:16:22] **KEVIN:** Yeah, I think so.

[00:16:24] **ALISON:** You recall walking a picket line when you were on strike. Was there any other rallies or events or things like that that would bring you guys together?

[00:16:47] **KEVIN:** There were events. When I got into the union as an A-person, I started to get active in union politics and registered people to vote. I spearheaded a competition for designs for a union banner.

There was a push at one point. The Navy wanted to make Pier 90 a base for their nuclear submarines, which would have meant a lot of jobs, because that's where the apple ships docked, and the car ships docked. I was able to unite Local 19 with environmental and anti-nuclear and community council groups to keep that from happening, and we were successful.

[00:18:13] **ALISON:** Very nice. You mentioned apples and car ships and different operations. The waterfront looked a lot different back then. What were all of the different jobs that you performed?

[00:18:28] **KEVIN:** We worked flour ships at Fisher's Flour Mill. I don't think it's still there. It was at Pier 18. It was a warehouse built in 1912—ancient, ramshackle. We had ships that docked there that had five hatches, usually. There would be five gangs of eight people. It hired way more people than the container operations.

The sacks were 50 pounds. I remember the first day, the A-men told us that we had to load the sacks, which were incredibly unwieldy and heavy, with the labels up. [laughing] Some people actually believed it.

But that was the hardest job. I remember loading 125-pound boxes of frozen fish that we two-manned, but Fisher's was generally the hardest cargo that we worked. It would usually take a week to fill up all of the hatches. There would be three decks.

[00:20:08] **ALISON:** How were you lifting those 50-pound sacks?

[00:20:14] **KEVIN:** Oh! [laughing] I thought it was going to kill me. I would just grasp them with my whole body and drag them. I remember my fingernails were blue, bruised from dragging these sacks. They were made with a plastic weave, which cut your hands.

The normal practice was to get a bull driver to lift the cargo board up so it was at waist level and you could drag the sacks down. That was the best technique for avoiding as much as possible lifting those sacks.

[00:20:35] **ALISON:** When you say "bull," what does that refer to?

[00:20:35] **KEVIN:** That is longshore parlance for forklift.

[00:20:35] **ALISON:** So, you have flour, you have cars, you have apples.

[00:20:35] **KEVIN:** Steel.

[00:20:35] **ALISON:** You mentioned containers. What was your role with the containers?

[00:20:35] **KEVIN:** Working stevedore on the dock, which was probably the most boring job there was—sanding under the crane legs, semi-pulling up under the crane, unlocking all four corners of the chassis so that the crane could grip the containers and lift them—hoist them—onto the ship, one after the other after the other. [laughing] Up to 200 times a day.

[00:20:35] **ALISON:** Did you ever drive the semi-trucks that you were unlocking?

[00:20:35] **KEVIN:** I never drove semi. That was one of the most boring jobs, going around and around and around in a circle. I drove forklift and heavy bull.

[00:20:37] **ALISON:** Eventually, you made your way up?

[00:20:37] **KEVIN:** Yes, after 19 years, I became eligible for crane training. We have this wonderful seniority system, which is colorblind and gender blind, and whoever has the seniority is eligible for training.

At that time, I was doing a lot of ship's clerk work to take a break from the wear and tear of longshore work, and was getting really bored with that, so jumped at the chance to rise from the ground level grind. [laughing]

[00:20:41] **ALISON:** Into the box in the sky. What was that journey like, from moving to working on the ground to being in control of the whole operation and the crane?

[00:20:41] **KEVIN:** It was amazing. I remember the first day that I drove crane. At that time, there were no elevators, so you had to climb the ladders and walk the stairways up 150 feet, climbing into the last pad, sitting down and trying to adjust the seat, which was always way too high for me.

Panels on either side of me with blinking lights and switches, and then the two levers—the one that would lift the container and then the one that would push it over the ship’s rail. Seatbelt on, looking down like I was painting my toes [laughing] with nail polish, looking down, over down below to all the little machines that now looked like scattered toys beneath me. Then doing the choreographed dance of lifting and hoisting and pushing.

[00:20:43] **ALISON:** Did you enjoy that job?

[00:20:43] **KEVIN:** Yes, I did, but it was incredibly stressful because, as you say, I basically set the pace for the entire dock. Everything depended on my speed of getting the container onto the ship. I was aware of the expense of the huge crane and all the strads and the semis. It was up to me until the day was done and the ship sailed.

So, it was a blast, and also incredibly stressful, and just took massive concentration. If my mind ever wandered, I would have to lasso it back, so it was very high pressure.

[00:20:43] **ALISON:** Most definitely. How was it received in the local at that time to have a woman in such a high position?

[00:20:43] **KEVIN:** There was a lot of resistance, but there were also people that were excited by the fact that history was being made. I would say it was a mixture, but I was up above it all. [laughing] Nobody could bother me while I was up there.

[00:20:44] **ALISON:** How many years did you operate the crane?

[00:20:44] **KEVIN:** Five years.

[00:20:44] **ALISON:** Up until your retirement?

[00:20:44] **KEVIN:** Yes.

[00:20:44] **ALISON:** Did you ever have any injuries on the job with all of that work?

[00:20:51] **KEVIN:** Minor injuries.

[00:20:51] **ALISON:** Do you have any other notable union events or politics or anything that stands out in your memory?

[00:20:51] **KEVIN:** I was molested on the job one time and I went to the executive board to complain and to insist that there be fines for that kind of behavior. The executive board was absolutely shocked that I would come and confess to that happening and insist that something be done; that people should be able to work and not be assaulted.

The executive board passed that, which I was thrilled with, but any motion that the executive board passes has to also go to a vote of the union. Going to the stop work meeting two days after the executive board, I remember

that day in the hall in that union meeting. The motion came up and it was just pandemonium, and the men said, “Women shouldn’t be here. If they can’t take it, they should leave.” And they ended up voting that down.

[00:21:10] **ALISON:** Were there any ramifications for the individual? None?

[00:21:10] **KEVIN:** No.

[00:21:10] **ALISON:** And no precedent moving forward to protect any women?

[00:21:10] **KEVIN:** No. And I could have sued the union at that time, but I was loyal to the union, so I didn’t.

[00:21:10] **ALISON:** Were there any ramifications for even you putting a motion forward on the job?

[00:21:10] **KEVIN:** Yes, I faced incredible hostility after that for about six months. I remember a job that I had with an old-timer working in one of the warehouses unloading vans onto the warehouse floor. I was determined that I was going to change this guy’s mind.

He was an old-timer who had been friendly to me before, so I thought I had a good chance. But he was very cold to me. I kept trying to engage him in conversation about what happened, and then he related to me about somebody claiming that he had been unfaithful to his wife, and somehow equated that situation. I said, “What would be my motive in making a false charge?” He didn’t have an answer for that.

But he continued to be really cold to me. Finally, I just said, “Dick, I want you to imagine that you’re in this container, eight feet by eight feet by 40 feet, with a man who was a head taller than you, and he grabs your crotch. How would you feel about that?”

He paused, and he thought about that for a minute, and I could see a change in his demeanor. He said, “Yeah, I don’t think I would like that.”

That was a small victory. I had changed one person’s mind. But then, other events happened, and it was all forgotten.

[00:23:03] **ALISON:** Did anything like that ever happen again to you or someone else during your time?

[00:23:03] **KEVIN:** No.

[00:23:03] **ALISON:** Did you ever hold union office?

[00:23:03] **KEVIN:** I didn’t.

[00:23:03] **ALISON:** Did any women during your time?

[00:23:03] **KEVIN:** Yes. Kristi Hagen was on the executive board. Oh, and then Andrea. Staller was her name then. I don’t know what her name is now, but she’s the welfare director. [Transcriber found Andrea Stevenson.] She held office, I can’t remember which one.

[00:24:57] **ALISON:** Okay. How many years total did you spend on the waterfront?

[00:24:58] **KEVIN:** Twenty-five.

[00:24:58] **ALISON:** So, you retired. Did you do any more years on the waterfront than required to retire at the time?

[00:24:59] **KEVIN:** No. I got early retirement because my back bothered me.

[00:25:00] **ALISON:** Since retirement, how has life changed? What does that look like? Have you had any ongoing activity or contact with the union at all.

[00:25:01] **KEVIN:** I haven't had much contact with the union, actually. I was really ready to retire when I did. My life since retirement, I've done a lot of writing. We have a sailboat, so we spend a lot of time in the San Juans. Hiking.

[00:26:32] **ALISON:** You say "we."

[00:26:34] **KEVIN:** I'm married to [Wayne Gridding?].

[00:26:36] **ALISON:** Do you have any children?

[00:26:39] **KEVIN:** No.

[00:26:39] **ALISON:** Do you have anyone in your family, next generation, that's in the union or anything like that? I know you had a sister.

[00:37:47] **KEVIN:** Right, and she was in the union. She came in after I did. Mostly did semi driving, and then she transferred to the clerks and retired from there.

[00:37:50] **ALISON:** Looking back at the 25 years, and all the different jobs, and being the first woman in the crane, what does this all mean to you now that you're reflecting back?

[00:38:26] **KEVIN:** I would say that it was incredibly hard. There were a lot of things that kept me going. I'm incredibly grateful for the generous pension that I have, and the health benefits that I have.

I have a major operation coming up—I'm going to get a kidney transplant—and I won't have to pay a dime for that.